

Uphill battle

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WASHINGTON - * As the cleanup of the radioactive site winds down, Missourians want to know the federal government's plan for safeguarding the tomb of toxic waste. And they can't seem to get answers.

Late next year, the Department of Energy will conclude 16 years of cleanup at Weldon Spring and leave behind a tomb of dangerous wastes visible on a clear day from the Arch, 30 miles east.

The government will have spent \$900 million for remedies, including burial of 1.5 million cubic yards of radioactive materials and chemicals in the seven-story hill that will stand as a monument to the bombmaking era of the 20th century. In the 1940s the site was used to make bombs and in the 1950s to process uranium for weapons.

But as the end of the cleanup project draws near, the federal government is doing far less to plan for the future of Weldon Spring than the state of Missouri and St. Charles County residents would like.

Less than a year from finishing the project, the Energy Department has only a draft "stewardship plan" for Weldon Spring's future, a document that ignores recommendations on safeguarding waste sites by the National Academy of Sciences.

The Energy Department's plan fails thus far to spell out clear lines of authority for surveillance, for testing surrounding water for contamination and generally for overseeing a site that will contain dangerous material for centuries.

The plan calls for an Energy Department office in New Mexico to be in charge but another office in Colorado to maintain the site. Missouri officials say they were told that still another Energy Department office in Tennessee would have a role.

"Management muddle" was how Stephen Mahfood, the director of Missouri's Department of Natural Resources, referred to the government's sketchy plan in a recent letter to the Energy Department.

Nor has the Energy Department mapped out a long-term mechanism to pay for monitoring and maintenance at the site.

Lacking special funding provisions, state officials and community leaders worry that they'll be forced to wage yearly fights to persuade Congress to protect their community.

Paul Mydler, vice chairman of the Weldon Springs Citizens Commission, put it this way: "The question is, how in the hell is all this stuff going to be funded?"

He asked, "Will Congress say, 'It's been five years and this site is cleaned up and since people aren't barking loudly, maybe we can save a little money here'?"

Thomas Nelsen, another commission member, said, "There's a concern that DOE (the Department of Energy) is going to try to wash its hands of the whole thing and just walk away and leave it sit."

Energy Department officials did not return repeated phone messages left at several offices around the country last week regarding planning for the future of Weldon Spring and other sites.

But Pam Thompson, the Energy Department's project manager at Weldon Spring, asserted that fears that the site would be neglected were misplaced.

"Maybe DOE won't be here, but people will be here and American citizens have governments, and someone will be here to respond to citizens," she said.

Nonetheless, the government has done little to reassure Missouri. Since July, when the Energy Department finished the latest draft of its stewardship plan -- its third -- Missouri officials have been rebuffed in demanding more details.

They are troubled by a preliminary suggestion that less than \$4,000 yearly will be made available for a state and local role. They are insulted by what they regard as better planning for the future of other waste sites when they are closed.

In correspondence with the government, the Missourians belittle the Energy Department's Weldon Spring plan as being loaded with jargon and "insider talk" that would have little meaning to people trying to protect the site in the future.

The dispute has generated a series of indignant letters to the government from Missouri's Department of Natural Resources, one as recently as last week complaining about the lack of attention to long-term funding.

Mahfood summed up the state's underlying fear in a letter written Sept. 27 to Jesse Roberson, the Energy Department's assistant secretary for environmental management.

"We are concerned that the Energy Department appears to be committing the same fundamental lapse which occurred during the Cold War: waiting until the project is done to consider the full long-term and life-cycle environmental implications of the decisions that are made," he wrote.

"We cannot stand idly by and allow the same mistake to be repeated."

Model for stewardship

The contents of the containment cell, as the tomb of wastes is called, reflect the hectic pace of military preparations in St. Charles County that began during World War II and proceeded for two decades.

Radioactive and chemical wastes were removed from 44 structures for burial in the cell, which covers 45 acres and stands 75 feet tall. Whole buildings were shredded and entombed with tons of contaminated soil beneath clay, a synthetic liner, more layers of gravel and sand and more than three feet of rock.

Before pronouncing the project completed, the Energy Department must finish securing a nearby quarry where the old Atomic Energy Commission dumped material from a uranium processing plant in the 1960s.

Missouri officials are not taking issue with the engineering. As recently as Nov. 8, the Department of Natural Resources congratulated the Energy Department team in Weldon Spring and its contractors for "hard work and good faith ... toward a successful cleanup."

What Missouri officials worry about is the future. And what the Energy Department does next at Weldon Spring is being watched far beyond Missouri.

Weldon Spring is the first of many such complex cleanup operations that the government will be finishing in the coming years. Then the next stage of an enormous obligation -- safeguarding still-dangerous sites -- will begin.

"I think DOE is under pressure to demonstrate that they can close these sites, and what they do at Weldon Spring will serve as a model, at least in the short-term," said Thomas Leschine, a professor at the University of Washington and the chairman of the National Academies of Science panel that identified deficiencies in the Energy Department's planning for waste sites.

"I have the general feeling that they are trying to do a better job of planning. But what they have is something inherently difficult to manage," he said.

"Faustian bargain"

Already, the government has spent \$50 billion on cleaning up nuclear waste. The scientists' report estimated that the cost would surpass \$200 billion -- more than enough to run the state of Missouri for a decade.

In a famous quote recalled in the Academies of Science report, nuclear scientist Alvin Weinberg referred to these obligations as "a Faustian bargain with society. ... The price we demand of society for this magical energy source (atomic power) is both vigilance and a longevity of our social institutions that we are quite unaccustomed to."

Nonetheless, the panel of scientists lamented, the potential problems have received little public debate.

Among its sobering conclusions, the scientists' report says few Energy Department sites will be cleaned up sufficiently to allow unrestricted use. Most will require long-term monitoring and activities that include "pump-and-treat" operations to minimize the spread of water pollution.

The scientists observe in their report that future problems at nuclear waste sites cannot be predicted and that the severity of future risks are not well understood. Many of the sites, their report says, will pose "risk to humans and the environment for tens or even hundreds of thousands of years."

The scientists faulted the Energy Department for its lack of preparation to oversee waste sites, noting that stewardship plans will be required for about 100 of 144 cleanup operations.

The report criticizes the Energy Department for taking what it calls a "restrained and piecemeal approach" which, among other things, has no provision for long-term funding. It also says plans must have "a clear system of governance that specifies what is to be done and by whom."

The report also stresses the need for the Energy Department to be open about its planning and give the public the right to review and comment on stewardship plans while they are being written.

"Transparency," the scientists wrote, "lays the groundwork for accountability."

Thompson, the Weldon Spring project manager for the Energy Department, said she was forbidden to talk about future government policies.

She added, "I don't think there is anything to worry about. I believe that people can be assured that nobody is going to walk away from the site."

But without details, Missouri officials are not finding such statements assuring.

In Washington last week, Robert Geller, who heads the federal facilities section in Missouri's Department of Natural Resources, said he was unable to get clear answers about Weldon Spring from Energy Department officials at a National Governors' Association meeting about waste sites.

"We still don't know who is going to be ultimately responsible. We have been told several different things at several different times," he said. "We're hoping they understand that Missouri is serious about moving forward."

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